

**“The Sources of Our Faith:
Transcending Mystery and Wonder”**

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I'd like to invite you now to turn to your hardback hymnals again.

There's something there I want to show you.

If you would flip through the first few pages,
past the table of contents and the preface,
you'll get to a page on the left-hand side that starts out
“We, the member congregations...”

This page is an excerpt from the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, of which this congregation is a member.

When you think of inspirational reading or great poetry,
probably the first thing that comes to your mind is not *bylaws*.
However, this bit of our UUA bylaws, to my mind, contains
some of the most beautiful language our tradition has produced
in our own day.

At the top of the page we have the seven principles
which many of us are familiar with and try to live by:

“the inherent worth and dignity of every person,”
“respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,”
and everything in between.

Below the seven principles comes a text
that many of us are less familiar with:

this is the statement we usually call “the Sources.”

It's a piece of poetry that was composed in 1984
to lift up the many streams of faith
that feed into our tradition and continue to give us life.

The text identifies six strands by name, and over the next six months
I'll be preaching on each of them.

I should confess right out,

I have something of an ulterior motive in mind.
Last year the Principles and Sources were up for revision.
This is something that happens regularly.
It's actually mandated elsewhere in the UUA Bylaws
that we take a look at the text of the Principles every few years
to make sure that the words we're using
are still able to carry spiritual energy for us.
Our liberal tradition has always warned us
against getting stuck in dead language,
doctrines and creeds that served their purpose for a time
but now are just empty words with the inner meaning lost.
Last year we were actually several years overdue
for this review process of re-examining the language we are using
in this very important text
that tries to capture what our faith is all about.

The group that was tasked with suggesting revisions
presented a new version of the Principles and Sources
at last summer's General Assembly
for our congregational delegates to vote on.
They left the Principles were largely unchanged,
but they completely rewrote the Sources.
They recast the whole thing in a way that, to my ear,
made the whole thing sound very dull.
Some of what they added was really good and important,
but the language they used was so clunky that the magic of it,
what William James calls that ability to beckon and invite us
into a sense of mystery and spaciousness—
for me, that was entirely gone.
Some people at the General Assembly liked the changes,
but others really did not. A few people actually printed up buttons
saying "Save Our Sources!" It was intense!
In the end, the revisions were voted down,
though the vote was very close,
and it sounds like the review process is going to continue,
which I think is great.

We'll give it another collective try in the next couple of years.
Meanwhile, out of that rather contentious process at GA,
I personally came away with a renewed appreciation
for the power of the language in these texts,
and all the history and energy that they hold.
So that's what I'm going to try to share with you
over the next few months.

Today we get to think about the first source:
*Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder,
affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit
and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.*

When this congregation took a look at the Sources a couple of years
ago, as part of the review process I was just telling you about,
I remember this was the one
that brought up the most confusion for people.
There was this sense of, "What is this 'transcending mystery and
wonder' they're talking about?" And not without cause,
because it's something that's very hard to put into words.

But I think we can start with *direct experience*. Going all the way back
to Emerson and the Transcendentalists in the 19th century,
our liberal tradition has said personal experience,
what we feel in our own hearts,
the struggles that we live through,
is *the* most important authority in religion.
If religious scriptures say one thing but our heart says another,
we go with our heart every time.
If a religious leader, like a minister preaching from a pulpit,
says one thing but we find we can't accept it,
we go with *our* understanding of the truth, every time.
You don't have to believe everything I tell you.

This is the spirit of freedom and personal responsibility
which we have inherited,

and which I hope will *always* be at the core of our faith.
Direct experience is our best guide.
Of course it's risky to depend *only* on our direct experience.
Sometimes we make mistakes. Sometimes we go astray.
But our trust is that when we live our religious lives in *community*,
as part of a congregation in which everyone is seeking to live
according to their conscience and their experience,
we all help to correct each other. We keep each other honest.
And the starting point is always what we feel and believe
in our deepest self to be true
because it has come out of our life and our experience.

So that's *direct experience*.

And then we get to this tricky phrase *transcending mystery and wonder*,
and if you are trying to figure out what on earth this means,
that is not surprising!

William James says *the* characteristic of mystical experience
is that it resists being put into words.

You can't describe it fully, not really.¹

But still you can try.

Earlier, with the children,

I told you about the experience I had
of watching the moon on the lake when I was a little girl.

That experience felt mysterious and wonderful to me.

It's hard to talk about, but I know in a very deep way
that it was and is important.

Some of us feel that sense of energy and peace and wonder
in wild places. Some of us feel it when we're with people we love,
or doing something we love to do.

Sometimes it just comes out of nowhere, as pure gift.

This kind of experience can happen to anyone at any time.

In every culture, at every time, human beings
have had these moments of intense, uplifting, healing experience.

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 380.

Many people have been changed forever by them.
Some have tried to talk about them, and
some of their accounts have been so compelling
that they've been preserved for hundreds and thousands of years
in the scriptures of the world.

We have the stories of Moses encountering God on Mt. Sinai;
Elijah hearing the still, small voice
after the wind and the earthquake and the fire;
Saul struck blind on the road to Damascus;
Mohammed receiving the testimony of the angel Gabriel;
Arjuna encountering the cosmic manifestation of Krishna;
the Buddha achieving enlightenment under the Bodhi tree;
Black Elk receiving his great vision of the Sacred Hoop.

Such profoundly transformative experiences may only happen
to a very few, but *all* of us can experience moments
that renew our spirits and open our minds and hearts.

I'd like to share with you two things that have happened to me.

The first one was back in November of 1999,

I had the chance to take a wonderful vacation with my sister.

We went to Italy and had a magnificent time eating pasta
and falling in love with Renaissance art and the Italian hills.

Halfway through our trip, we went to a small farm in Tuscany
that rented out rooms as a bed-and-breakfast.

We gunned our little green Fiat up the steep icy road,
met the guy who looked after the farm,
and the two sweet sheepdogs that lived there,
and settled in to our room.

Then we headed out for a little walk just as the sun was setting.

I was happy to be on vacation,

I was loving the experience of life in this beautiful country,
but still my heart was heavy.

I was feeling very sad after having broken up with a boyfriend.

I looked out at the sky, all soft and pink and delicate,
and the sun setting over the green hills,

and somehow I felt immensely saddened by all the beauty around me.
But all of a sudden I heard a voice in my head
saying quite clearly, “All will be well.”
Simply that.
The words, of course, were Julian’s—
Julian of Norwich, the English mystic
who promised us that *all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.*
but where they came from in that Italian twilight,
I have no idea.
It didn’t feel like an ordinary thought.
It felt like something that came from outside me,
as if someone else was speaking to me.
I have never felt the need to interpret “where it came from,” exactly,
but it felt like a message that I could trust absolutely.
Something to hold onto. And I do.

Another thing that happened to me
was once when I was asked to talk to someone
who was going through a very hard time in their life.
We sat together
and this lady told me about the struggles she was going through,
and how messed up it felt,
and how scared and ashamed she felt about what was happening.
And I tell you, something came over me as I sat listening.
I felt washed with this incredible compassion for her—
I mean, I hope we all feel compassion for someone who is suffering,
but this was so intense.
I felt this great wave of love come over me
for this person I had never met before
and would probably never see again.

It was startling in its intensity,
this feeling of infinite love
for someone who felt so in need of forgiveness and reassurance,
and in that moment I felt like there was nobody on earth
who could not be embraced in that love,

and I thought then,
maybe this is how God sees us.
God is not a big part of my religious vocabulary—
I'm not usually all that comfortable with that word—
but those words just came to me unsought, unbidden.
I felt like I had been given the chance
to see from what felt like a God's-eye view,
the God of the Universalists, maybe,
who loved everyone so much more
than we could possibly love ourselves.
The intensity of that feeling passed, but the experience lingers.
Something to hold onto.
Something to practice.

This is what's happened to me.
These things are precious to me
and I'm glad to have a chance to share them with you.
But you have your own experiences, I know,
which are just as significant and beautiful and powerful.
As we come to the end of this service,
I'd like to invite you into a time of silent reflection
on the moments in your own life
when *you* have touched mystery and wonder,
when *you* have felt renewed and deepened and opened.
These are your gifts, and they are holy.
Let us be in silence together.

(Silence)

So may it be.
Amen.